



Volume: 04 Issue: 12 | 2023 ISSN: 2660-454X

<https://cajitmf.centralasianstudies.org>

Leveraging User-Generated Content Platforms for Tourism in Bukhara

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Received 16th Oct 2023,
Accepted 19th Nov 2023,
Online 30th Dec 2023

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Abstract: The research upon which this thesis is based aimed at the problem identification in the tourism sector of Bukhara, with the objectives of developing an ICT based framework, namely User-Generated Content platform that enhances information sharing and collaboration within the tourism industry. The role of the ICT as a facilitator of information sharing in tourism and realms involved has been sharply rising with the result of high reliance of both travelers and services on online platforms. Developing IT facilitated tourism sector in a region thus can boost the economy and the influx of the tourist. UGC is now mainstream and it is an increasing part of tourism marketing strategies. The main steps taken are the state of art, data collection, the Study of User-Generated Content, the study of digital platforms, developing a business process/ an IT based-solution.

Key words: ICT, Facilitator, User-Generated Content, collaborative information sharing, collaboration, tourism industry.

Introduction

One of their characteristic features of tourist activities is the multitude and the diversity of the informational flow that is accompanied with constant updating and high exchange rate operations. Informational relationships exist between all participants in the tourism market, with special attention paid to information intended for end users (tourists). In modern conditions, the possibilities for the development of the tourism industry are closely related to the possibilities of the Internet. It is estimated that, in 2014, 59% of trips by EU residents traveling internationally relied on digital tools to book accommodations, and 67% for air transportation. Within the framework of the information economy, the scheme of economic relations between the producer and the consumer of tourism services is changing: information - production - tourism services. Therefore, knowledge of existing information services in tourism, study of the main areas of application, development of skills in the use of information technology, as well as the formation of competencies for informed recommendations to tourism management by using information systems seems relevant. Given the results of the survey, carried out by means of questionnaires and collected data, this study sought to address to the constrained development and the expansion of both local and international tourism in Bukhara due to the lack of available

information sources and the ease to access to information within tourism industry caused by little collaboration within tourism providers.

Methods

This research aims at finding most valid contemporary solutions for current problems in tourism field in Bukhara based on data collected through questionnaires and analyses. Methods which are used are as following:

Data collection

The Study of User-Generated Content

The Study of Digital Platforms

Developing a business process/ an IT based-solution

Results

Tourism, ICT and Information Sharing

Online platforms that match demand and supply are acting as intermediaries between peers who are involved in sharing (Juul, 2015). One such platform is a collaborative information sharing platform. IACA (2014) defined an information sharing platform as “a centralized computer system that allows authenticated users to collect, manage and share structured and unstructured data sets from a variety of sources ” When well designed, information sharing platforms serve as "one stop shops" for users. Moreover, an information sharing platform leverages communication facilities across board making them good channels for communication. Lastly, information sharing platforms allow for automated content discovery which reduces information overload and ensures information is communicated to the right person, at the right place, at the right time basing on a user's context.

Recent studies in the strategic adoption of ICT in tourism are more centered on the use of the internet, social media and mobile technologies (Buhalis, 1998;Carvhlo et al 2010). Buhalis (1998) proposed the multi-dimensional framework for strategic adoption of ICT in tourism. He mentioned different applications that support inter-organisational functions for horizontal, vertical and diagonal integration. However as innovations in ICT continue to improve, systems integration technologies have also changed. New business concepts such as smart tourism are being adopted which have provided tourism organisations with marketing platforms through persuasive power of word of mouth. Nevertheless, collaboration around ICT is becoming the rule in tourism. By forming inter organisational ICT enabled networks, tourists can be granted a concerted and unified tourism experience.

Influence of user-generated content

“User-generated content could not be more important in the travel industry. Everywhere you look, it’s having a significant impact on decision making.” (Dan Christian, **Chief Digital Officer of travel conglomerate Travel Corporation’s (TTC)**). A study in the journal *Tourism Management* found that “UGC is perceived as more trustworthy when compared to content from official destination websites, travel agents, and mass media.” The study revealed that consumer trust of travel UGC is driven by consumers being able to get a feel for the destination prior to traveling. The trustworthiness and influence of UGC is not a given and is determined by many factors including the relevance, quality and usefulness of the information, as well as users’ past experiences with the online platform. There are many factors leading the UGC as an invaluable travel research and brand making method, namely

1. Increase in smartphone usage
2. Rise in social media channels

3. Consumer distrust brand content
4. Creating and publishing content is easier
5. It is a part of new interactive tourism experience
6. The growth of experimental and transformative travel
7. Visual content growth and the ability to present it.

Conceptualizations & Definitions of Digital Platforms

Prior researches have defined and conceptualized digital platforms based on different views. Some conceptualizations are based on a technical view that focuses on the technical elements and processes that interact to form a digital platform. Other studies have conceptualized digital platforms based on a non-technical view that presents platforms as a commercial network or market that enables transactions in the form of business to business (B2B), business-to-customer (B2C), or even customer-to-customer (C2C) exchanges (Tan et al. 2015, Koh and Fichman 2014, Pagani 2013; Ye et al. 2012).

According to the survey held by World Bank Group, digital platforms in the travel and tourism industry are increasingly used, both by travelers and by businesses engaged in the industry. Digital platforms and online travel agents are major players. For instance, Booking.com comprises 29 million accommodation listings in 154,000 destinations worldwide and operates in 190 countries. Similarly, TripAdvisor reports 8.4 accommodation listings in 156,000 destinations spread across 49 markets, with 490 unique monthly visitors that provide more than 250 reviews and opinions per minute. At the same time, foreign travelers are increasingly relying on digital platforms to plan their travel plans.

Discussion

Digital platforms and the cost of travel decisions

Digital platforms would be expected to increase the demand for tourism services through their impact on the pecuniary and non-pecuniary cost of travel: the price of airfare and accommodations, expanding the choice of alternative destinations, the time spent making travel plans, or even reducing uncertainty about the quality of a future trip, among others. Goldfarb and Tucker (2019) analyze how digital technologies affect economic activity in the broad, not only in the tourism sector, distinguishing between five different types of costs that such technologies help reduce: (i) search costs; (ii) replication costs; (iii) transportation costs; (iv) tracking costs; and (v) verification costs. In this typology, replication and transportation costs do not have an impact—or, at digital goods and information. Replication costs refer to the ability to provide a digital good to additional consumers at zero marginal cost; similarly, the cost of transporting digital goods drops to zero as information is digitized. On the other hand, the impact that digital technologies have in reducing the other three types of costs—search, tracking, and verification—affects the market for tourism services directly. For the most part, cost reductions in those three areas would translate into lower prices for tourism services, but as we will see, that is not always the case.

Ways of improving information sharing

The we have produced eight different labels with regards to ways of improving information sharing and collaboration in Bukhara. These labels are: System Integration, Statistics, Data Analytics, more interactive websites, proactive and reactive measures, logistics, infrastructure, online information sharing platform. These labels makeup the potential remedies for overcoming challenges and/or improving collaborative information sharing among tourism stakeholders and tourists in Bukhara.

Technology Based Initiatives

From the Data analysis, it was discovered that technology has a crucial contribution in the enhancement of tourism collaborative information sharing. All participants felt that more adoption of ICT within tourism would greatly help market destinations. One participant felt that there was need for change of attitude regarding ICT through applying "more commitment to good IT". The significance of this theme is further strengthened by ongoing implementation of new web based information sharing systems by two organisations from which participants were selected. The participants were excited about the development as they believed this would make huge change in the way information is shared.

Conclusion

Collaborative sharing of tourism information greatly enhances destination performance and attractiveness by increasing its visibility both locally and internationally. By harnessing the power of ICT, Bukhara's tourism sector can gain enormous vitality through collaborative information sharing. ICT makes it easy and almost effortless to coordinate collaborative activities through virtual organisations. As the study showed, it is not easy to form organisational collaborations. There is need for tourism policies that ensure collaborations in critical domains such as sharing of information. Once the benefits of collaborating and sharing information begin to materialize, participation improves ultimately leading to development of the tourism industry. This study recommends the adoption of the proposed framework by all tourism stakeholders in Bukhara. The framework offers strategies for resolving the lack of availability of tourism information by advocating for more information sharing and providing for ways of accessing information. Through online platforms, systems integration, mobile devices and social media the framework can help to make the tourism experience seamlessly convenient and worth it.

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